Dear Alice,

What are the symptoms of a heart murmur? Can a heart murmur go away and, if so, how long does it usually last? Is there a cure for it? How do you know when you have a heart murmur?

Answer

Dear Reader,

*Lub-DUB. Lub-DUB. Lub-DUB.* This is the sound made by a typical heartbeat. A heart murmur, detectable with a stethoscope, is an atypical sound, usually a “swoosh,” occurring during a heartbeat. Put simply, this is the sound of turbulent blood in or near the heart. Heart murmurs can have a few different causes, many of which are harmless, while others may indicate a health condition. There is no cure per se, but heart murmurs can disappear if the underlying condition of the heart murmur has been addressed. Keep on reading to learn more about the different kinds of heart murmurs, as well as what to do about them.

There are two types of murmurs: innocent and abnormal. An innocent heart murmur is simply caused by the sound of blood moving rapidly through the heart. They’re generally harmless and usually won’t be accompanied by any other symptoms. Innocent murmurs are quite common and can be caused by a variety of things. Some of these include:

- Being an infant or a child (50 percent of children have heart murmurs at some point during childhood)
- Physical activity
- Fever
- Anemia
- Pregnancy
- An excessive amount of thyroid hormone in your body (hyperthyroidism)
- Heart surgery

*List adapted from Mayo Clinic.*

Some heart murmurs are indications of a more serious, underlying condition. These are the abnormal heart murmurs. For children, the most common cause is being born with structural issues in the heart, called a congenital heart defect. The most common types include having a hole in the heart or having issues with the structure or function of the valves in the heart. In older children and adults, the causes of abnormal murmurs are often from conditions that may
damage the heart. This can include an infection such as endocarditis (infection of the lining of heart and valves), the thickening or hardening of heart valves, or disease such as rheumatic fever. The tricky part is that these, too, aren’t often accompanied by any other obvious symptoms (besides the unusual sounds a health care provider will hear when listening to the heartbeat). However, some of the symptoms can include:

- Weight gain
- Pronounced neck veins
- Poor appetite in infants
- Sweating without exertion
- Fainting
- Dizziness
- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath without cause
- Skin that appears blue

If you suspect that you have a heart murmur or experience any of these symptoms, you may want to visit a health care provider to learn more. When you see them, they'll listen to your heart. If they believe they hear a murmur, they may be able to tell you what kind it is and what, if anything, needs to be addressed to keep the ticker in tip-top shape. If they believe it to be more serious, they may refer you to a cardiologist, who may run further tests if necessary.

Here’s to a healthy heart!

Alice!

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